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How Tennessee is beating the nation in reducing prison recidivism | Opinion

Joe Pryor Guest Columnist

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Key Points

The Volunteer State has seen recidivism dip below 50 percent; the national average is 67 percent.

CoreCivic is working with community partners to help ex-inmates get their second chance at life.

Joe Pryor is the senior director for reentry services at CoreCivic.

In Tennessee, we take a strong stance against crime with our dedicated law enforcement officers and our judicial system working hard to keep our communities safe and secure.

We also know that more than 95 percent of all incarcerated individuals will eventually be released. Nationally, that means 650,000 former inmates returning to our towns and neighborhoods every year.

As one who has dedicated almost three decades of my life to helping these individuals prepare for reentry into mainstream life, it is clear we must do more to help them succeed.

While successful reentry of an inmate begins with individual transformation, it ultimately benefits us all. It results in safer communities and less crime. It means more people finding meaningful work to provide for their families and contribute to the tax base.

Yet, the U.S. has a massive recidivism crisis. Currently, three out of every four inmates will be rearrested within five years of release. These overwhelming numbers mean thousands of men and women are stuck in a desperate cycle of returning to crime and prison, with devastating consequences for their families and our communities.

The reasons for high rates of recidivism are complex and numerous, but among the most common are substance use disorders, lack of education and marketable job skills, and the inability to secure housing or stable employment due to a criminal record. Unless we can address these barriers, former offenders simply find it easier to return to a life of crime.

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How 'Go Further' works to help inmates

At CoreCivic, we have made reducing recidivism a central part of our company's mission. We believe our nation's alarming recidivism numbers can and must be dramatically reduced, but we also know the work must start at the very beginning of an inmate's sentence.

Our newly-implemented "Go Further" process brings together an array of resources and programs available to the inmates in our care and empowers them to develop life plans that address their barriers to successful reentry.

That plan can include Career and Technical Education courses, substance use disorder treatment, victim impact programs and family reunification work, among others. We are taking an innovative approach to reentry services by incorporating these classes into a holistic process tailored to each individual's specific needs. Our focus is on what it will take to give this individual the best chance of never returning to prison.

By providing industry-credentialed training, our goal is to quickly help incarcerated men and women find a job after prison. As of February, CoreCivic is assisting more than 1,700 inmates in Tennessee in training programs ranging from heating, ventilation and air conditioning to information technology.

While an incarcerated person's second chance begins during incarceration, it doesn't end there. Reentry Centers and aftercare organizations provide a vital bridge to resources critical to long-term success.

Locally, CoreCivic partners with organizations like Men of Valor, Dismas House and The Next Door, which provide ongoing counseling, temporary housing, food, clothing, employment opportunities, clinical support and other resources for individuals just released from prison.

These groups are making a real and significant impact in reducing Tennessee's recidivism rate. By working together, the Volunteer State has seen recidivism dip below 50 percent while the national average still sits at 67 percent. While we are encouraged at this improvement, there is still work to be done.

Those who have served their time and paid their dues for past actions deserve a second chance at life. At CoreCivic, we often use the phrase, "We care about the one," because every person is important, and changing one life can change many lives. Ultimately, that means building a better world for all of us.

Joe Pryor is the senior director for reentry services at CoreCivic and the former chief chaplain for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

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